DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 394 552 JC 960 287

AUTHOR Kerwin-Vaca, MaryAnn

TITLE Challenges and Opportunities in Chairing Multi-Disciplinary Departments.

PUB DATE Feb 96

NOTE 7p.; In: The Olympics of Leadership: Overcoming Obstacles, Balancing Skills, Taking Risks. Proceedings of the Annual International Conference of the National Community College Chair Academy (5th, Phoenix, AZ, February 14-17, 1996); see JC 960 276.

PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.

DESCRIPTORS Academic Deans; *Administrator Behavior; *Administrator Effectiveness; Community Colleges; *Department Heads; Instructional Leadership; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Leadership Qualities; *Leadership Responsibility; *Leadership Styles; School Administration; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

Departmental chairs at community colleges must administer, coordinate, and direct all of the activities within a given department, a responsibility which becomes more difficult for chairs of multi-disciplinary departments (MDD's). To deal with these additional responsibilities, MDD administrators must have special leadership skills. They must be able to balance their loyalties between their former departments and the new areas added to their responsibilities, and they should remain visible to members of all the departments. Administrators may also be called upon to provide leadership in a discipline in which they have no training or knowledge, thereby creating potential conflicts with the faculty of that discipline. To overcome these difficulties, department chairs will have to empower faculty members, admit their limitations, delegate authority when necessary, and open the channels of communication within the MDD. By working in this way, the faculty and staff under an MDD chair will become increasingly systems-oriented, and they will learn to look for the "big picture." Chairing an MDD provides the opportunity to work with a broad variety of specialties by allowing administrators to run the department, teach, and learn simultaneously. (MAB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 394 552

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CHAIRING MULTI-DISCIPLINARY DEPARTMENTS

By

MaryAnn Kerwin-Vaca
Associate Dean, Allied Health
Elgin Community College
Elgin, IL

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TC 960 287

Paper Presented at the
Fifth Annual International Conference for
Community & Technical College Chairs, Deans and Other Organizational Leaders
February 14 - 17, 1996
Phoenix/Mesa, Arizona

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ACADEMY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN **OTHER THAN PAPER COPY** HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Filan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Maryann Kerwin Vaca is the Associate Dean of Allied Health and Department Chair for Nursing at Elgin Community College, Elgin, Illinois. She has direct responsibility for the Department of Nursing that offers a career ladder Licensed Practical Nursing and Associate of Applied Science Professional Nursing program, as well as, continuing education courses for licensed nursing personnel. In addition to directly chairing the 200+ student body nursing programs she administratively oversees the basic nursing assistant, clinical laboratory technician, dental assisting, emergency medical technician-paramedic, physical therapist assistant, phlebotomy and surgical technology programs.

Mrs. Vaca holds a diploma in nursing from St. Joseph Hospital School of Nursing, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a BSN and MEd. from Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and an MA in Nursing from New York University, New York, New York.

Mrs. Vaca was the 1995 recipient of the Gilbert I. Renner, Excellence in Administration Award at Elgin Community College.

Challenges and Opportunities in Chairing Multi-disciplinary Departments

A department is defined as a specialized sector of an organization. A multi-disciplinary department is one in which several distinct and different disciplines are contained. The department chair is the person responsible to administer, coordinate and direct all activities within a given department. This responsibility becomes remarkably more difficult when one is assigned to chair a multi-disciplinary department.

First and foremost, a department chair must be a leader and role model. The chair must inspire the department members to a shared vision and a sense of purpose. This feeling of departmental empowerment can best be accomplished by instilling in the department members a shared sense of peer respect and by demonstrating the positive results that will be obtained by channeling that respect into teamwork. The chair must always look to keep that teamwork strong by interweaving the needs of students, faculty and administration into a framework of unity. This framework accentuates the particular strengths and positive attributes of each group while at the same time allowing each group to retain its distinct identity and role. Academic department chairs, in their complex roles, must always be considering what best serves the needs, first of students but also the needs of the faculty and the administration.

In carrying out this complex role, it is necessary for the chair to carry on a delicate juggling act. Some of the complex roles and responsibilities assumed by department chairs are: maintenance of relationships with administrative authorities and other academic support units within the college necessary to effectively operate the department; providing leadership in the continuous expansion and development of current and new programs and/or courses within the department; preparation, administration and monitoring the department budget; selection, hiring and evaluation of department faculty and support staff; maintenance of relationships with local, state, regional and national approval and accrediting bodies pertinent to the area; generation of program schedules, room assignments, full and part-time faculty assignments and contracts; counseling individual faculty, support staff and prospective, as well as currently enrolled students; marketing and promotion of all department activities and offerings; keeping abreast of current trends pertinent to areas; and participation in outside activities and organizations relative to respective disciplines.

Paramount to the department chair in carrying out the aforementioned roles and responsibilities is the need to assure that department activities and actions are in accord with the college's mission statement, values and goals.

Alan Tucker, in Chairing the Academic Department: Leadership Among Peers, states "It is the chairperson who must supervise the translation of institutional goals and policies into academic practice." In applying Alan Tucker's statement to everyday experience, it quickly becomes evident that the department chair is more than simply the "head" of the department. The chair is a visionary, a spokesperson, a teacher, a direction-setter and a change agent. In order to be able to accomplish the expectations of a department chair you definitely must gain the trust and loyalty of both administration and faculty. Loyalty in the "translation" often leads to the classic "between a rock and a hard place" scenario: As a department chair, you are considered a member of the administration, but at the same time you are also viewed as a member of the faculty. To win, you must ask for a quid pro quo--show loyalty to and demonstrate trust for each side, and expect the same in return. If both the administration and faculty feel that they are being dealt with on an equal playing field, this return will be accomplished quite easily.

It is quite clear that chairing a department presents its fair share of challenges, and these may seem magnified when one looks to chairing a multi-disciplinary department, but this is not necessarily true--the basic roles and responsibilities are essentially the same. What changes is the breadth, depth, type and scope of responsibility.

You will definitely encounter new and greater challenges as you take on the additional responsibilities of chairing a multi-disciplinary department. As chair of a single-discipline department, more likely than not your responsibilities covered the area in which you received your education, making you an expert of sorts in running that department. Being prepared and understanding every detail of the operation made you secure and allowed you to be comfortable in your leadership style. In a multi-disciplinary environment, however, you are not the expert--you don't know every detail of the operation--and your feelings of security may quickly dissipate, to be replaced by feelings of intimidation.

Managing a single-discipline allowed you to devote your undivided attention to that discipline alone. You had the trust and loyalty of that departments' members, and you could easily focus on the needs of the students and faculty. Being at the head of a multi-disciplinary department, however, requires a keen sense of time management in order to balance the needs of each discipline in a fair manner. Your loyalties may become torn between your former department and the new areas added to your responsibilities, and members of your former department may develop a sense of abandonment. You must deliver to these individuals a message of positiveness--remind them of their exemplary work ethic and willingness to accept challenges--and encourage them to become independent from you

while maintaining the sense of peer respect and teamwork that you helped to instill in them. Don't leave them completely, but slowly wean them from any unnecessary dependence that they might feel for you. A key for managing your former department and your new areas is keeping each group "in the loop." Find ways to personally keep in touch with each area: eat lunch on a rotating basis with each area, make walking rounds, talk to students, take in a class, or just sit down for an informal occasional chat. Your presence will instill a feeling of security among the members of each discipline as they develop the sense that you are taking the time to understand their needs and listen to their input. As the old adage goes, it is not the quantity of time that is important but the quality. Always remain visible, but set aside real time to reach substantive matters within your department.

Your lack of training or knowledge in a certain discipline may not fare well with some members of that discipline, and these individuals may put you to the test at times. You must quickly discern ways to win them over. First and foremost, show an interest in understanding the intricacies of their discipline--acknowledge each member's expertise in that discipline, spend time with them, get to know each member as an individual. Empower them by letting them teach you about the mission and goals of their area, their needs and expectations. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know." Once they develop the sense that you are a good listener and learner, they will not be hesitant to offer you advice, or to trust your judgment in making a decision for their discipline. To quickly take charge, ask new associates to review their job descriptions within the first few weeks. Make mutual changes and suggest priority shifts. This practice will assist you in knowing what your new associates should be doing as well as lets them know that you are interested in their input and contributions from the very beginning. You don't need to become an expert in each discipline--you have faculty skilled in the area, utilize them well. In summary, open channels of communication, your willingness to learn and your efforts to work with and through the department staff will quickly earn their trust and loyalty.

The administrative responsibilities of a multi-disciplinary department also will present the new chair with challenges. New areas may require a working knowledge of terminology and technology foreign to you, but needed to represent those areas to upper administration and to outside groups. Some areas may have specialized approval/accrediting bodies with standards and criteria with which you must become knowledgeable. As discussed previously, go directly to that area and get the necessary information from its members. If you have won the loyalty and trust of that area through your pro-active methods of communication, you should have no problem in soliciting their support "to learn the tools of their trade."

After you have worked to bring each discipline into your fold separately, the next step is to get the disciplines to work together in a "big picture" framework. Try to schedule meetings where representatives of several disciplines are present. Some of the issues that arise may turn out to be applicable to some or all of the other disciplines. Each discipline will begin to see the many commonalties that exist between them, and each will bring a differing process of approaching each commonality. A mutual respect will soon develop as these groups get to know each other through working together. The sense of teamwork discussed earlier will begin to emerge on a much larger scale as these groups intermingle, reducing conflicts and feelings of competitiveness, and thus allowing you to free more time to devote to your responsibilities.

It is quite obvious that the level of challenge increases as one assumes greater responsibilities, especially when entering an area that is outside of one's given expertise and discipline. I am, however, a firm believer that with every challenge comes an opportunity. As you explore these challenges and devise methods to overcome them, you will soon realize that your accomplishments have enhanced your self-image along the way. You will develop networks not only in your own institution, but also in other local and national institutions and organizations. You will gain an opportunity to interact with new and diverse publics, and you will never have the opportunity to become stagnant or bored--there is always something to learn!

In summation, chairing a multi-disciplinary department gives you the opportunity to work with a broad variety of specialties, allowing you to administer, teach and learn at the same time. The individuals under you will become more systems-oriented and learn to view the "big picture". The opportunity may also serve to inject you with a fresh sense of enthusiasm as you watch the entire plan come together, knowing that your guiding hand has had at least a part in the synergy taking place. This might not have been possible in a single-discipline department, as all of the individuals under your guidance were already looked upon as experts in their field, and needed you for little more than administrative duties.

You now have the opportunity to pick up the gauntlet and accept the challenge laid before you. Chairing a multi-disciplinary department will allow you to grow as a person and a professional, and will greatly enhance your overall perspective of your institution. You will soon find yourself evolving into a risk-taker and change agent, always on the alert for new opportunities and challenges. When these present themselves to you, seize the opportunity and take the challenge in stride. You will find yourself more than prepared for the task at hand.